

# The hack pack

Jim McClellan on a teen movie with glamour, romance and hacker heroics



**'YOU'RE GOING** into a trance ... a cyber-trance.' I'm at Pinewood on the set of *Hackers* watching British director Iain Softley take Johnny Lee Miller through a quick reaction shot. Playing a youthful hacker flying

into New York, Miller is supposed to look through the window and see the familiar city grid as a kind of datascape, as a place where, thanks to his keyboard-crunching skills, he can have some fun and wield some power. Hence the cyber-trance.

Later they're shooting a scene inside the computer centre of a multinational corporation with the film's two villains, evil hacker Fisher Stevens and calculating PR woman Lorraine Bracco. Extending the city as computer metaphor, the set consists of a grid of 'data skyscrapers' made out of green plexiglass.

*Hackers*, which is due out next summer, focuses on a group of digital teens (Miller, co-star and love interest Angelina Jolie, Jesse Bradford, Matthew Lillard, Laurence Mason and Renoly Santiago) who hack into an oil company database and, after unwittingly taking something important, become entangled with the US secret service and a particularly nasty computer virus. It has love, action, big special FX and

have their spin-off CD-ROM game video and the Internet ad campaign all planned. Zippies and hackers who've been living the cyber life since the 1980s will probably be quick to write the film off as a mainstream Hollywood cash-in. I doubt whether they'd smile at Moreu's gag that 'really this is a film about relationships, a cyberpunk romantic comedy'.

Still, I'd be inclined to give it the benefit of the doubt. Iain Softley is a skilled filmmaker who managed to turn his last project, *Backbeat*, about 'fifth Beatle' Stuart Sutcliffe, into something much more interesting than a pop biopic; and Moreu clearly knows his stuff. He has been interested in hacking since the early 1980s. It was during the US crackdown of 1989-90 that 'things reached critical mass' and he decided to write a script about it all. As part of his research, he went to a meeting organised by New York-based hackerzine 2600, where he met the kids who were at the centre of the government panic, in particular Phiber Optik, aka Mark Abene, the 22-year-old who spent the bulk of last year behind bars on hacking charges.

He got friendly with them but didn't hack with them, though he ended up being pursued by the authorities himself, in particular by the IRS, which suddenly decided that all sorts of things were wrong with his tax bills.

He also started to get ideas for how a hacking film might work. 'One guy was talking about how he'd done some really interesting stuff with a laptop and payphones and that cracked it for me, because it made it cinematic - you could have them hacking in different locations.'

While hacking is a 'sexy' subject, hackers themselves (at least in the public imagination) aren't perceived as sexy. 'That's changing,' says Moreu. 'As technology got cheaper in the 1980s, it really spread. You'd go to a 2600 meeting and, yeah, you'd see the classic geek. But Phiber and the others were hip hop kids, into girls, not nerds at all.'

In other words, it really isn't too much of a stretch to cast good-looking types like Miller and Jolie. Some may find it harder, however, to take the way they are turned into heroic figures. Of course, every film about teen crime runs into the same problem and it seems likely that someone in authority will accuse *Hackers* of irresponsibly glorifying what one judge referred to as 'intellectual joyriding'.

While Moreu admits that some hackers are testosterone-fuelled info-vandals, he also argues that Phiber Optik is a political prisoner, a scapegoat whose punishment far outweighs his 'crimes'.

'There are a lot of legal precedents being set in cyberspace,' he concludes. 'In a way, there's a war going on there that we don't even know about and the people in the front line are these kids. The movie comes down portraying the hackers as heroes because of the belief that there is a hacker ethic which is democratic, which is about openness and empowerment. But I hope that apart from entertaining people the film just raises the debate about all this, makes people realise what's going on.'

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rollerblading - the standard Hollywood youth package, in other words. It also seems rather timely, at least over here. The week before I visited the set the papers were full of the British Telecom hacking scam.

Given the fear and fascination hacking provokes, it's surprising there haven't been more films about it. The last to take the phenomenon (semi) seriously was *Sneakers*, in which 1960s rebel Robert Redford and his hi-tech covert operations team, including a hacker played by River Phoenix, battled data terrorist Ben Kingsley.

Chatting in his office, scriptwriter Rafael Moreu says that, like *Sneakers*, *Hackers* isn't just about hacking. Rather it tries to play up the fact that hackers represent the first real counter culture since the 1960s. 'This whole scene is not just about computers. Take hip hop; to me, that's aural hacking. Hacking itself is just part of something that's much bigger. In fact, to call hackers a counter culture makes it sound like they're a transitory thing; I think they're the next step in human evolution.'

It seems that *Hackers* isn't so much the latest hacksploitation movie as the first cyberculture exploitation film. You can see why this would seem like a winning commercial proposition - the film-makers



Chinese take out: the heroes of *Hackers* in action in New York's Chinatown

## Bulletin board

● **NEW DIMENSION** Bringing 3D computer graphics to the people and striking a blow against Silicon Valley elitism (that's what their press release claims), software developers True-D and RenderMorphics have released a free 3D viewer over the Internet. Designed to run on PC or Macintosh, it will let you view and manipulate 3D objects in real time. The aim is ultimately to develop applications for the Net - eg, 3D World Wide Web pages - and even something approaching the 3D cyberspace familiar from William Gibson's novels. We'll see. To download the viewer go to the True-D web site (<http://www.render.com/oneday/viewer/>).

● **DOGS IN CYBERSPACE** If you're bored with the standard music business World Wide Web pages, check out Black Dog Towers, run by Black Dog, the British anarcho-mystic intelligent techno outfit. The site is more a classic BBS, reflecting the Dogs' interest in fringe culture, paganism and ufology. There is a variety of files for download, conferences and links to a MUD (an on-line text-based role-playing game). The dial-up number is 081 981 7285. Incidentally, Spanners, the Dogs' latest album, is out next week on Warp.

● Send E-mail for Jim McClellan to [jjm\\_mcc@clx.compulink.co.uk](mailto:jjm_mcc@clx.compulink.co.uk).

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